

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit

Do you think John knew what he was doing?
Do you think it was calculated and planned?
Did study methods and take courses in successful leadership, while off in the wilderness?
Did he hone the skills of vision casting, or learn to write mission statements?
Did he study techniques and was everything said and done with an end goal in mind?

What do you think John's five-year plan was?
Where'd he think he'd be in 10 years?
With his head on a platter?
Would his word be successful?
Would he have his own following with temples, and cell-groups, and entrepreneurial disciples?

Honestly, I don't think John gave a single thought to any of it.
He had no plan and no guiding mission statement.
He didn't envision anything for him or for any so-called followers.
He just did as the Lord gave him to do, and spoke as the Lord gave word to his voice.

We have much to learn from John.
We won't allow for such a preacher today.
We won't have a church without a plan, or a program without a vision.
We demand growth and a way to count that growth.
We want to make sure our money will have a return, that our time isn't being wasted.

Our problem is both a head problem and a heart problem.
Our heads are so rational, so critical, so careful that our good works rarely see the light of day.
Or, our heads are so confused that they don't know what should be done in the first place!
On the other hand, our hearts are cold when it comes to our neighbor.
Outrage over Ferguson is easy, while for just \$700 you can get an abortion any day in Wichita.

John appeared among a people just like us.
Jerusalem was full of those suffering both from head problems as well as heart problems.
“*John appeared,*” it says, “*proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.*”
Just what is this baptism?
Jerusalem and Judea hadn't heard anything like this before.
John took up his spot along the Jordan, preaching repentance and the forgiveness of sins.
Justification.

That's what Advent is all about.
That's what Baptism is.
That's what the Church is.

It's not about numbers or success.
 It's not about mission statements, or vision casting, or quantifiable growth.
 It's about solving the head and heart problem we all have.

But it's not John that's the focus.
"Behold," Isaiah writes, *"I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way."*
 Bold as he is, eating locusts and wild honey in the garb of a prophet, John is just the forerunner.
 Baptism as it comes from his hand prepares for the Baptism that comes from the hand of Christ.
"But He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit," John says.

This all is quite a sight for those who went out to the wilderness.
"They were baptized," Mark tells us, *"confessing their sins."*
 The word of repentance had done its work.
 They were struck to the heart.
 Their minds were held captive.
 This was where they needed to be.
 This was God's answer to their pain.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God."
"Cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned."
 Christians, this is for you, too!
 Christ is the coming one, whose sandals John wasn't worthy to untie.
"Cry!" the voice says, *"And I said, 'What shall I cry?'"*
 Comfort.

But what comfort is there if we're left in our sin?
 By what means will our heart be settled and our mind stop racing?
 By the word of the Baptizer.
 By the water that delivers forgiveness.
"Behold, the Lord God comes with might, and His arm rules for Him."
"Behold, His reward is with Him, and His recompense before Him."

Jesus is the coming one.
 Just as John proclaimed *"He who is mightier than I,"* so also do we as a Church preach Christ.
 John baptized with water.
 Jesus baptizes with the Holy Spirit.
 John pointed toward this redemption, calling sinners to faith in Christ.
 Jesus delivers this redemption, offering His own body and blood for our justification.

This sort of preaching requires no mission or vision statements.
 There's no need for growth statistics or developing methods and techniques.
 The Holy Spirit doesn't bow to our planning and purposes, but blesses us by the Word.
"The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."
 That's how Mark begins his gospel.

And that's where we as a Church gather.

Around the Lord and His gifts given for us and our salvation.

"All the country of Judea and all Jerusalem were going out to him and were being baptized."

Advent calls us also, away from our callous hearts and confused minds.

"Stir up our hearts," we pray, *"to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son."*

Such is the work of the Spirit through the word.

So *"that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds."*

Sin that affects both heart and mind must be revealed and removed.

So that with both heart and mind we might love and serve as we've been called to do.

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